

A CASE OF BIRD CAPTURE BY A CULTIVATED SPECIMEN OF THE HYBRID
NEPENTHES × *MIXTA*

NIGEL HEWITT-COOPER • The Homestead • Glastonbury Road • West Pennard • Somerset, BA6 8NN
• UK • sales@hccarnivorousplants.co.uk

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As a nurseryman, I'm used to being asked what is the biggest prey item caught by my plants. Of course, as a general rule the answer is insects, but there are some species, especially *Nepenthes*, which can consume larger animals such as lizards, frogs, small rodents, and even rats—as has been well documented. Indeed there have been several reports of cultivated *Nepenthes* specimens catching mice, although it is hardly common in comparison to wild plants where a much broader spectrum of fauna is to be found.

Exceptional prey capture is not only limited to *Nepenthes* though. A number of years ago I found several small lizards had been caught by the Venus Flytrap, *Dionaea muscipula*, at the previous nursery location in Surrey (Hewitt-Cooper 1999), and in more recent times I rescued a Robin, *Erithacus rubecula*, from a *Roridula dentata*, which although missing a few feathers and somewhat sticky footed, flew away hopefully not too traumatized.

I recently made a discovery which I believe to be a first for a plant in the UK. A specimen of *Nepenthes* × *mixta* (*N. northiana* × *maxima*) hangs during the summer months in my tropical garden, from the branches of an old cider apple tree, where it grows quite happily despite a lack



Figure 1: *Nepenthes* × *mixta* plant *in situ*.



Figure 2: Tail feathers protruding from pitcher.



Figure 3: Decomposition of the lower section of the pitcher.



Figure 4: Five days later, and the pitcher has virtually died.

of attention on my part (see Fig. 1). It grows in a 20-liter container pot which holds sufficient moisture to prevent it drying out too much, and is a specimen of the common clone known as *N.* “Miranda”, which was left over from one of the flower show displays I had staged. It was placed outside as an experiment, which has clearly been successful as it is enjoying its third summer in this position.

Outside, these and indeed many other carnivorous plant species are much more efficient at catching prey, and the pitchers are frequently over half full of flies and wasps—far more than the plant would catch in a greenhouse environment, proving their effectiveness.

In July 2011, I found in one trap the body of a small Blue Tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus*), which was wedged head down in the trap with the tail feathers protruding from the pitcher mouth (see Fig. 2). The bird had been in this position, I estimate, for 2-3 days, was clearly dead, and the base of the trap had started decaying due to the presence of such an unorthodox and large capture, as can be seen clearly (see Fig. 3).

The trap was of the upper type, with the characteristic infundibular shape of most *Nepenthes*, and measured 160 mm from the lowest point at the base to the top of the peristome at the lid attachment. The opening of the mouth was 51 mm high by 24 mm at its widest point.

A prey item of this size in what is not a particularly large trap by *Nepenthes* standards, would decompose long before the plant could gain any nutritional benefit, and five days later the pitcher had died back considerably (see Fig. 4).

Naturally of course, *Nepenthes* do not actively attract birds, as indeed they do not on their own entice the other documented prey mentioned earlier, but the abundance of insect life in and around these plants is a convenient food source for other insect eating organisms.

In this case, the unfortunate bird, I believe, landed on the base of the peristome, leaned in to retrieve an insect probably floating on the surface of the pitcher fluid within, and either became wedged or toppled forward too far and fell below the water line.

I would be interested to hear of other unusual prey items discovered by growers, both by *Nepenthes* and other carnivorous plant species.

References

Hewitt-Cooper, N. 1999. Of slugs and snails and lizards tails—On the varied diet of *Dionaea muscipula* Ellis. *Journal of the Carnivorous Plant Society* 20: 3.

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